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19 August 1986CHERNOBYL: MORE FALLOUT IN EASTERN EUROPE

The political fallout from the Chernobyl disaster continues to accumulate in Eastern Europe. Initial concerns over public safety and crop damage have given way to a rethinking of East European nuclear development strategies. Additionally, Chernobyl's fallout has persuaded some East European regimes to seek Western assistance on nuclear safety matters.

- Five American firms are exploring with the Commerce Department the possibility of approaching East European governments to discuss nuclear safety cooperation. These overtures mark the initiative by US companies toward nuclear cooperation with Eastern Europe.
- In Czechoslovakia, growing public concern has evidently prompted the regime to delay construction work at one nuclear power plant and mount a media campaign designed to reassure a skeptical public about the safety of existing or planned nuclear power facilities.
- The Hungarians recently presented the Italian government with a draft protocol for an agreement on nuclear energy cooperation. Like a joint Italian-Yugoslav accord in effect since 1978, this agreement would include bilateral discussions on nuclear safety and environmental protection.
- The East German government, having already sought West German advice on nuclear safety matters, has reportedly approached a Finnish firm that specializes in modifying Soviet reactors with Western safety technology.

There are no easy answers for Eastern Europe, a region already beset with chronic energy shortages. Extraction of coal and other indigenous energy sources is already at the maximum, and hard currency shortfalls prevent purchase of above-plan oil and gas needs on the world market. Thus the urgency of the energy dilemma virtually compels the East Europeans to persist with their nuclear development strategies.

By accentuating nuclear concerns in the region, the Chernobyl disaster has probably ruled out the ambitious timetables many of the East European regimes set for themselves. Moreover, it has made the East Europeans more ready to engage in international discussions on nuclear safety. To gain access to new safety technology and equipment, they may also become more amenable to international controls and inspection.

- For us, these trends pose certain risks of nuclear technology transfer and information leakage -- but they also unique new opportunities for new forms of US and West European involvement in East European nuclear energy development, as well as for encouraging greater East European independence from Moscow.

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